



Cinema 16: An Interview with Amos Vogel

Scott MacDonald; Amos Vogel

Film Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 3. (Spring, 1984), pp. 19-29.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28198421%2937%3A3%3C19%3AC1AIWA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

cial light and only he agreed to do this. Thus we have in some shots a warm light on one side and a cold light on the other; you could say this is an ultra-classic film, after all, Carmen blows hot and cold . . . it is a film which is constantly between hot and cold, and the images express what is happening in the emotions.

For the cinema, your final words in the film, "This is called dawn," could well be changed to "This is called dusk" . . .

It is true that for the cinema I have a sentiment of dusk, but isn't that the time when the most beautiful walks are taken? In the evening, when the night falls and there is the hope for tomorrow? Lovers rarely ever walk about hand in hand at seven o'clock in the morning . . . for me, dusk is a notion of hope rather than of despair.

There is something, however, that I am beginning to find very beautiful in the cinema, something very human which gives me the desire to continue working in it until I die, and that is precisely that I say to myself that the cinema and myself may die at the same time . . . and when I say "cinema" I mean cinema as it was invented. In other words, cinema, which deals in human gestures and actions (unlike painting or music and dance) in their reproduction, can probably only last, such as it was invented, for the duration of a human life. Something between 80 and 120 years . . .

This means that it is true that the cinema is a passing thing, something ephemeral, something that goes by . . . of course, today

they are trying to stock them on cassettes, but the more videocassettes you buy, the less time you have to watch them . . . so it seems that collecting cassettes means something else, it's a form of stockpiling provisions, not a form of eating one's provisions. Some kind of safeguard for the future.

So I now accept that cinema is ephemeral. It is true that at times I felt differently, that I lamented the future, that I said "What will become of us?" or "How terrible," but now I see that I have lived this period of cinema very fully.

You mean you are happy it's over?

It may not be, but one period of it is. My parents lived its first period; they didn't tell me about it; I had to discover it myself with the help of people like Langlois and some others, in museums, but I have lived my own period fully, my road is marked, I will last this precise time.

I already see the new times, such as they are, and I have always been interested in the new; television . . . anyway, soon there will be no more images on television but only text . . . it has already begun . . . you will no longer see an image of carrots which you can buy in a supermarket and the price you may have to pay, because it would take a Flaherty or a Rouch or a Godard to film them, and if they took me I would get interested in the cashier and I'd start to tell a story. . . but you will just be told in words, "The carrots are cooked." That is the cinema of tomorrow and already that of today. For me, this is quite a gay conclusion.

SCOTT MacDONALD

Cinema 16: An Interview with Amos Vogel

Amos Vogel's impact on North American film awareness is impossible to measure. In 1946, with the help of his wife Marsha, he founded what soon became, with 7,000 members, one of the most successful and influential film societies in American history: Cinema

16. For seventeen years he supplied New Yorkers with regular screenings of dramatic features, social and political documentaries, avant-garde work, animation, scientific films . . . every interesting, challenging form of film he could find, some 1,000 films in all. To

my knowledge, he was the first to present dozens of significant film-makers to American audiences: Antonioni, Franju, Bresson, Ozu, Truffaut, Varda, Polanski, Oshima, Conner, Brakhage, Anger, McLaren, Richardson, Lenica, Breer, Rivette and Casavetes, to name just a few. And he did it all without a penny of public or private support beyond the cost of individual memberships. When he finally ended Cinema 16 in 1963, he went on to co-found (with Richard Roud) the New York Film Festival. In 1974 Random House published his *Film as a Subversive Art*, an extensive and fascinating critical dictionary of films which have as a central concern the subversion of the film viewer's consciousness. He is presently a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications, and writes regularly for *Film Comment*.

The following interview was recorded in two sessions during February/March, 1983. Vogel has checked the interview for accuracy. —SM



Were you involved in film before you arrived in this country?

I was born in 1921 in Vienna, Austria. Even as a kid I was interested in cinema. I owned a 9 1/2 mm camera and a hand-cranked projector. I went to many, many films, and was a member of a large film society in Vienna. One film that was a shattering experience for me, and led me in the direction I later took, was *Night Mail*, the British documentary by Basil Wright. It showed me that one can make a film about a so-called "uninteresting," seemingly unimportant subject—the British Post Office—and create a beautiful work of art, something that moved people, that moved me certainly, and gave me new insights. I also saw a lot of commercial films in Vienna, both European and American.

Hitler came to Austria in 1938 and stated that he and I could not live in the same country. He had more power than I did, so I left—I was lucky enough to still be able to leave—and came to New York in 1939. I was a student, did all kinds of odd jobs, tried to make a living. I was very involved with modern art, attended and loved the fabulous art lectures by Meyer Schapiro. But I had absolutely no

intention of becoming involved in film in a professional way.

At a certain point after I came to New York I became aware that there were a lot of films around, in 16mm, which were not being shown publicly, and which were not available anywhere for me to see. Once in a while I'd get to see one at a local university, or I would read about them. I'm *not* talking about avant-garde films here. There were always two components to Cinema 16: what are now called avant-garde films, and what might be called nonfiction films, or documentary, including scientific studies, psychological studies, informational films, educational films. . . . I'd read about them in a local newspaper, or somebody I met (not a film person, but a member of a union or a teacher who had seen a film) would mention something to me. I found out who the distribution companies of the films were; I went to them and said, "Well, how can I see your films?" and found out it would be very expensive to rent them and that I'd have to get my own projector. I didn't have the money.

How did you first learn about avant-garde film?

There was a film magazine—it lasted for only three issues—called *Cinema*, run by Eli Wilenski—I think that's what his name was in those days. (Years later, under the name Eli Wilentz, he became the owner of the most important, and by far the best bookstore in New York City: the 8th Street Bookstore.) That magazine mentioned that Sidney Peterson and James Broughton had made one or two films that sounded very interesting: surrealist films, poetic films. He may also have mentioned Kenneth Anger. Another person, of course, was Maya Deren. She had begun to show films in New York and had begun to write. I saw her films and was very impressed by them.

It occurred to me that if I was interested in such films—both avant-garde and documentary—and couldn't see them, there must be other people in a city the size of New York would be equally interested. Maybe I should get some of these films together and attempt to show them publicly. Maybe enough people would come to see them to pay for the film rental, and the whole thing would take care of itself. So, as a spare time activity my wife

Marcia and I, and a couple of our friends, decided to see if we could get a little money together and rent the same theater that Maya Deren had rented, the Provincetown Playhouse, and put on a program of these films. Next step: I went back to film distributors and convinced them to let me look at films for free on their premises because I was going to try to show them publicly afterwards. Many of them agreed. I chose a first program and decided to put ads in the papers.

Do you remember the films?

Yes. One of them was *Lamentation*, a dance film with Martha Graham; another was Sidney Peterson's *The Potted Psalm*; there was an animated film by Philip Stapp called *Boundarylines*; Julian Huxley's film on ape behavior—*Monkey Into Man*—produced by Stuart Legg; and Douglass Crockwell's *Glens Falls Sequence*. The Provincetown Playhouse had 200 seats. We announced showings for six o'clock and eight o'clock one evening. It was a huge smashing immediate success. We had to repeat this first program for 16 evenings! (With two showings per evening.) My naive but logical supposition was immediately proven correct. I have no doubt that if I had chosen other films, I would have done just as well, so long as they made for a well-rounded program.

How do you account for that much interest? At a lot of theaters where independent film is shown now, there are audiences sometimes of half a dozen people.

The situation now is totally different. But, how I account for it then is that there was a large, untapped reservoir of people who could not see these films in *any* other way. At the present time in New York we have at least seven showcases for independent cinema. They're splitting the audience, whatever the audience is, because they all show films simultaneously. In those days there was *only* Cinema 16. Another reason is the absence of television. Though television isn't showing very much of this kind of film, as we both know, once in a while there's something on PBS, or wherever; and in any case, television draws audiences away from film.

Within three years, Cinema 16 reached approximately 5,000 annual members. Later we averaged 7,000. We're talking about a large group of people, but at the same time, also



Joseph Vogel's HOUSE OF CARDS

a very small group—there are seven million people in New York. In any case, this idea worked, not because of my excellence, but because historical circumstances allowed Cinema 16 to fulfill a real social need. Very quickly, we realized that planning to show films on a one-shot basis, on one evening, was not a very good idea. For the second program we put on, we thought of expanding and adding weekend shows and really building the audience, so we spent the \$1000 we had received as wedding presents on expanded advertising, including an ad in the *Times*. Well, that second program took place on the evening of the worst blizzard in New York history. There were four people at the theater: the projectionist, myself, Marcia, and some crazy person who came through the snow. We lost a thousand dollars immediately and the whole thing was a big flop; we were faced with an immediate catastrophe because we had absolutely no funds. The operating costs of theater, staff, film rental and advertising had been too large. Then my father, who had been a lawyer in Vienna and knew about the business world, told us we could try to keep going on credit, hoping that income from the next shows would pay for what we spent and leave us with a little surplus. This is exactly what we did; we were so naive that we had never even heard of doing business this way!

A second problem we ran into was even more serious, and more interesting. It started on the first evening. A representative of the New York State Censorship Office came to the theater and said, "Listen, you can't show this program, because your films have not been submitted to the censors, and have not



MOMMA DON'T ALLOW, directed by Tony Richardson—early British “Free Cinema” documentary

been approved by them.” I said, “I don’t know anything about that. I know there’s some kind of censorship for Hollywood films, but what’s this got to do with me?” He said, “Every film that’s shown publicly in New York has to be okayed by us. You have to have a censorship seal.” I said, “Look, what are you going to do? I want to show these films.” And they looked at me and realized that I’m not a conniving businessman, but some kind of naive young guy who really didn’t know. And they said, “OK, you can show this program, but after this, you have to submit all your films to us.”

When I began to submit films to them (we started with our second program), we ran into impossible problems. Example: part of the censorship law was that you had to submit a copy of the script; I wanted to show a French animated film for children which had a nonsense language sound track. I had no script. We had to hire a stenotypist, who came and took down “ba ba, booboo . . .” We had to pay the stenotypist some fantastic sum, like \$20 an hour, equivalent to \$40 an hour now. We didn’t have the money to do that. Remember, scripts existed for MGM films, but not for ten-year-old British documentaries or Bulgarian comedies! Secondly, we had to rent the films from the distributors early to submit them to the censors, who sat on them for at least a week. And they were doing me a favor; they were doing them very fast! So we had to pay high rental fees because the distributors weren’t going to be able to use the films for two weeks. Thirdly, some films—Peterson’s and Broughton’s, for example—used nudes; sometimes there was some sexy business. Well,

the censors applied the same standards to us that they applied to Hollywood films. There was a film by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid—she was married to him at the time—called *The Private Life of a Cat*. It was a beautiful documentary of their cats at home. This film included birth sequences, which made the censors reject the entire film as “obscene.” Can you believe this?

We decided that we couldn’t possibly continue this way. I’m a total enemy of censorship in *all* of its forms. Period. Without any reservations. To me this process was absolutely obnoxious—“obnoxious” isn’t strong enough. I was betraying something, compromising myself by submitting the films to the censors. We had some discussions with a civil liberties lawyer, and decided that we were going to start a private membership club. When you do that, you’re not subject to censorship.

Did your troubles with New York State censorship end completely once you’d become a club?

Completely, though there was one stipulation. There’s pre-censorship and post-censorship. We eliminated pre-censorship completely by becoming a film society. However, with post-censorship, the police can go into a place and say, “You *have shown* something that is obscene.” Had I desired to show hard-core porno films at Cinema 16, I certainly would have had access to such films, but I think we would have been closed by the police. It was not possible to show hard-core films to a general public then, even in a club atmosphere. In any case, I had no desire to do that, not because I’m against hard-core porno—it just wasn’t what I was after.

Anyway, if you’re a club, you’re not subject to blizzards, because you collect the membership fees in advance for an entire year. If the member doesn’t come, for whatever reason, you’ve still been paid. Of course, it also meant that we could not sell individual tickets, and we had programs where we had to turn *hundreds* of people away. But you could join the night of the performance, if you paid for the entire year. The fees were very low, \$10 a year for 16 performances.

I started showing films in 1947 and six months later we were a membership film society and remained that way until the very end, in 1963. We were nonprofit and tax-exempt,

but the only way we could get the tax exemptions was because the government checked us out to see that we were on the up and up, that we were not putting a profit into our pockets. What we were allowed to do, of course, is pay salaries. We never had any problems about profit because the amount of money that came in simply paid the cost of the operation, plus very reasonable salaries. In the beginning we had nothing, but ultimately, when it got to be good, Marcia and I together got up to maybe \$15,000 a year.

Projectionists were another interesting problem. The union came after us immediately. They said, "This should be unionized," and I was in favor, I've always been in favor, of unions. I said OK, despite the fact that they insisted on *two* high-priced union projectionists per show. But it was a unionized operation from the very first performance to the very last. I'm proud of this.

Marcia was in charge of taking in memberships; a friend of ours would sell film books at the theater. We hired ushers, who got paid \$2 an hour, or whatever it was in those days. Very little. So you see it was a very minimal operation. It was always determined by the yearly budget: in some years we had fewer members than in others, though many of the operating expenses remained the same. So we would take a lower salary that year.

How long were you in the Provincetown Playhouse?

Very briefly. We grew too fast. Why have 16 nights for 200 or 400 people each? It wasn't economical. First, we moved to a place called the Central Needle Trades Auditorium, a huge place: 1600 seats, very modern, in a local school here. It had a nice projection set-up with a booth and big screen, real nice seats, murals on the wall from WPA days . . . We had *two* performances of each program there, on one evening; that meant 3,200 people for each evening.

You filled it?

Yes! And that wasn't all because then we realized there might be people who didn't want to come to the Central Needle Trades Auditorium, but who might come to a real movie house. Of course we couldn't rent a theater during normal show times, but we made a deal with several theaters—the Beekman, for instance, and the Paris—first-run

art theaters in Manhattan. We booked the Murray Hill Theater and the Paris for 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings; at 1:00 o'clock their regular show started. We paid a fee to the owners, and we showed the same Cinema 16 program there that we showed in the Central Needle Trades Auditorium. Those theaters had 500 seats each, on the average. Actually, the very first showing of the Cinema 16 Film Society took place at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, also an art theater; the film was the premiere of Hans Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy*.

Did you have a sense of the sorts of people who came to the screenings?

We did questionnaires, things like that. There were a lot of artists and intellectuals, and would-be intellectuals and would-be artists. The gamut ranged from the quite sophisticated, the movers and shakers on the cultural scene, to school teachers and secretaries, people who wanted to widen their horizons. I'm continuously surprised by the well-known people who say to me, "Ah, Cinema 16, how wonderful it was, where has it gone," and this and that. I have thought that it would be an interesting research project sometime to go through the lists name by name and try to find out who these people are now. All the Beats came. Ginsberg and the rest. All the film people came: people who were teaching film, who were making films. And, on the other hand, there were many liberal bourgeois people. It was the only place to go to see the films.

Could you apply for state or federal grants?

There was a totally different situation in those days in respect to funding. There was not any aid. There were no private foundations interested in this sort of activity. And what really amazes me, in retrospect, is that

The Needle Trades Auditorium



this project ran for 16 years without *any* outside support. That means it depended 100% on membership fees. I didn't have a rich father who could give us money when we had a deficit. Nor did we attempt to raise funds from within Cinema 16. It's conceivable, obviously, that there were people there who had money, but we made no attempt to find out.

At what point did it become a full-time involvement for you?

Originally it was going to be a part-time thing, but after the Provincetown Playhouse success, it was obvious to us that this should be full-time.

I looked at thousands of films to select the programs. I began to go through the catalogues of whatever distribution firms existed, and there were many. It wasn't as though I had to go into barren territory. I had more films than I could handle. But not avant-garde films. That field had to be developed. Peterson would tell me he knew so and so who had made a little film, and I'd get in touch with him. Or people, having heard of Cinema 16 in New York, would write and tell me about their films. Tens, hundreds began to drift in. Any film submitted to us was looked at. I had very good help with this—Jack Goelman, who worked with me.

I made folders for every film I saw, regardless of its length. While I was watching each film, I took notes, and the notes went into a folder. As of now, at age 62, I have between 20,000 and 30,000 folders.

An entire year's program—16 different events—would be put together in advance. It might consist of 200 films or 50 films, depending on length.

Did you have particular things in mind when you were deciding on programs, or did you just program the films that knocked you out?

I think the latter would be an honest way of putting it. I wanted films that in some way would disturb you, would add to your knowledge and make you change. I think the whole notion of change was very basic to Cinema 16. I've always been very involved with the idea of creating a world which is different from the one in which we are living; I'm very dissatisfied with *this* world. I have always considered myself to be a radical socialist, and



James Broughton's *MOTHER'S DAY*

I have always had this curious notion that even a film on cosmology or a psychological study or an avant-garde work can serve a positive function in improving the world, because it takes us away from where we are now and opens us up to new possibilities.

There was inevitably a strong subjective factor in all these decisions. Essentially you choose in terms of who you are, and who you are is, in turn, the end product of a very long prior development, including your environment, all the influences that have worked on you: your parents, your children, your school, your books, even your genetic constitution. My experience with Hitler was important to me. All these things enter into the picture, obviously.

There were definitely avant-garde films or independent films that I did not choose. I felt they weren't good enough to be shown. On the other hand—this is an important point—there was never any attention paid to what might be called Box Office. I think Box Office is poison. Many times in my life I've had the possibility of starting a commercial theater, but I never wanted to do it because I *knew* that if I did, I would become the prisoner of what the box-office requirements were. That was another wonderful thing about having a membership set-up. I was able to present programs which I knew in advance would antagonize most of the audience. But that was OK; there were other programs they would like. In any case, people learned that when they went to Cinema 16, they had to expect to be displeased sometimes.

If you showed a program that offended people one week, was attendance down the next week?

No. When people were offended by a pro-

gram, there was usually a very small percentage who would be extremely upset. They would write us letters, or call us up and say, "How dare you show this piece of shit!" If they said, "Give us our money back," we were delighted to do so. We wanted to get rid of them. We weren't going to have them tell us what to show. I showed one of the worst (i.e., most powerful) Nazi propaganda films ever made, a film that to this day cannot be shown anywhere: *The Eternal Jew*. I imported that from the Dutch Film Museum. Jan De Vaal, the director of the Museum, and I made a special arrangement. The film was stopped at the border here. They wouldn't have let it in, except that Siegfried Kracauer, himself a Jewish refugee from Germany, wrote a letter to the customs people and explained to them that I was going to have a very educational evening for which he was going to write program notes (which he did, by the way). It was allowed into the country for one showing only. When I showed that film, there were many Jews who felt that I had done the worst possible thing; I'd shown a film which specifically said all Jews were as evil as rats.

In some instances I chose films with sex in them. In those days that itself was more than some people could abide. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*? It was a scandal in those days to show a film with a gay theme. The censors didn't allow it. And even though we had a private club, there were people who felt gay issues should not be talked about. I felt, why not? There are people who are like that. And I would show the films more than once. I'm a strong believer in showing essentially anything that has human and aesthetic validity. Maybe it's obnoxious to some, but there's a fighting element in me which rebels against authority and constraint. That has been true throughout my life, and it came out in my choice of films. People would come to me and say, "You know those films you showed yesterday with the red, blue and green dots? They gave me a headache." I'd ask, "What did you take?" They'd say, "You *really* gave me a headache!" so I'd say "If you get too many headaches, maybe you shouldn't come."

Did film-makers appear with the films?

Rarely. We did not have that tradition in those days. At every showing we did have four pages of single-spaced program notes which

we produced ourselves. Even now there are not many places with program notes. I believe in program notes. I think they have to be done very carefully; you have to be very objective. You shouldn't try to impose something on the audience by having Amos Vogel or somebody say "This film is marvelous!" I don't think that pays. But on the other hand, a lot of interesting information can appear in program notes. But, no, we did not have film-makers come in person. It wasn't that they came to me and I refused to let them appear; the film-makers weren't interested in coming. Film-makers did attend our Creative Film Foundation events. But even then they didn't really talk. They were available for questions, but that wasn't an important part of the proceedings. In retrospect I think it would have been better had we also had such programs. We did have well-known critics or film scholars from time to time, people like Parker Tyler.

It must have been very exciting to explore all those films and learn what people would like and how they would respond. Are there moments in the first year or so of your operation that stand out?

It was exciting. It was wonderful. And it was a continuing process of feedback. Sometimes, of course, what stands out are not the high spots, but the difficulties. We had huge difficulties with the Hans Richter film, because the distributor was a very crass businessman. I learned so much about the film business from him. One day we had the film, the next day we didn't. But we came out OK in the end. We showed the film, and Richter and I became very good friends. He was a great guy. I loved him.

The whole business with the avant-garde was very exciting. When I saw Peterson's films and Broughton's at the very beginning of Cinema 16, I was very excited. I can't convey to you how I felt. They were just marvelous for me. *Why* is an interesting question, because as it turned out, my enthusiasm was shared by only a small proportion of the audience. The majority were either against it, or they were totally indifferent to it. They couldn't see what I saw.

Do you have a sense of why that is?

A very simplistic way of putting it would be to say that it's by far the most difficult thing

for people to take in or absorb or appreciate, because essentially it deals with a new way of seeing. There's something very comforting about dealing only with the conventional, and, of course, something extremely conservative, if not reactionary. Hollywood and television are constantly giving us things that we've already seen, both in terms of content and in terms of style. The most interesting and important avant-garde films are precisely those films that have never been done before—in style, in content, in form—and therefore are extremely difficult for most people to accept. I prefer to be upset, and one of the criteria I use when I look at films and write my notes is unpredictability. If I can say that I don't know where a film is going or how it's going to get there—that's one of the greatest assets. I had hoped that by showing these films at Cinema 16 and by making audiences more and more familiar with them, I would develop more tolerance and a better understanding of them. I'm sure I succeeded, but only within certain limits. Always there was the complaint, especially with abstract films, "I got a headache from looking at it." They said it then, they say it now. It's obviously an ideological headache.

The main reason why I personally liked these films has to do with what I'd call "visual sensibility." I believe people involved with culture, and maybe everybody, has some primary sensibility, a verbal or literary sensibility, or a visual one. I was so entranced with visual modern art—paintings, photography, anything visual—that it carried over, of course, in film. When I see a Peterson or a Noren or an Anger film, I am transfixed; I get acute sensual, sensuous pleasure from it, a pleasure I want others to feel as well. That's why I showed those films.

We had at Cinema 16—and this was a direct result of what I wanted Cinema 16 to be—two different audiences, at least two. We had an audience that preferred documentary and nonfiction, social and political films, realistic films; and we had an audience that preferred avant-garde and experimental films. There were instances where the documentary group would say to me, "What the hell are you showing these avant-garde films for! Obviously they're frauds." "Fraud" was an important word, like "It gives me a headache!" On the

other hand, the avant-gardists were saying, "What the hell are you showing these documentary films for? They're hackneyed; realism doesn't exist . . ." I was in the middle. For me the films all had a common denominator: they created a disturbance in the status quo.

I'm often surprised by the way in which people who are savvy about contemporary art, poetry, and music are still not able to accept parallel developments in film. In this sense there seems to be a gap between film and the other arts.

Well, I'll give you one reason. When you look at a very advanced kind of modernist painting, you can decide whether you want to look for one minute or for half an hour, or just turn away. With film you're a captive. The abstract or surrealist film that someone has made cannot be conveyed to you in an instant. An instant is as much time as some people look at modern art, even when they're *interested*. May I'm exaggerating: maybe it's half a minute or two minutes. If you've got a film that goes on for 15, 30, 50 minutes . . . or an hour and a half, there's a kind of domination of the film-maker over the audience. Secondly, in other art forms—literature and painting for example—not only has modernist work been known and accepted for a long time, but in fact modernism has been dominant; we call it *serious* literature or *serious* art. This is not true of film; in film you have the total domination of Hollywood, and Hollywood was not, is not, in the twentieth century. But don't think for a moment that because the majority of members said in our polls that they didn't want to see avant-garde films, that I stopped showing them. I used the polls just to get a feeling of where people were.

The time element is important, and people are imprisoned in darkness. But still it seems strange to me. I've routinely used The Sound and the Fury in my American literature classes, and students struggle with it, but there's never any feeling that I'm doing something terrible by assigning it. Most students admire the book. But if I show Serene Velocity (and it's a class period, so it's clear that the film can't possibly be longer than another 30 minutes or so), they usually react as though I've purposely tortured them. Of course, in The Sound and the Fury there is a narrative. Reading the novel is largely involved with finding the

conventional narrative beneath the complex form and language . . .

And that gets you involved. But you can't do that with so many avant-garde films.

Now, I want to make another point. I have come to the conclusion in my own life that we are not uniformly open to new trends in all media. It varies from person to person. Let me be quite personal about this: I love avant-garde film, but I have definite difficulties with very advanced modern music. Why? There are differences between human beings and inconsistencies within us, and that's good too. I think most human beings do not represent a particular viewpoint across all media. There may be such people; if so, they are closer to a true avant-garde. But there aren't many of them. I think some of the resistance to avant-garde films is—I hate to use the word—genetic. I'm absolutely convinced that if you gave me 100 undergraduates for two years, two courses per year, I could develop in half of them a real appreciation for what's being done in those films. But only in half.

A related question. I've found in programming my own series, that when I program a film, I almost always get a fairly sizable audience, but when I program a film and film-maker, I get a much smaller group. In my head, having the film-maker present is an advantage, but not to most people.

Maybe they've had experiences with some of the film-makers as speakers. You know, they aren't always that wonderful. For you and me they add something (not always!), but for a more general audience, I'm not too sure. There's only one way in which a more general audience loves the film-makers, and that is the way we used to do it, and the way it's still being done at the New York Film Festival. If at the end of a film which has been well received, the film-maker is there to receive the applause, a wonderful rapport takes place between the audience and the film-maker. But, if that continues into a discussion with the film-maker, only a certain proportion of the audience will stay, and the questions that come from the audience, I'm sorry to say, are not terribly good. As a result, the film-maker doesn't open up sufficiently, either. But there have been exceptions: very fruitful interchanges, even with general audiences.

I don't remember seeing any other film

programmer present scientific films, though it seems like a very good idea. Even now, I'm not sure I'd know how to locate quality scientific films.

I had to do an awful lot of spade work to find my sources. There were films in distribution, and I finally got to them. There was an outfit called Psychological Cinema Register which had a very large collection of films used primarily by medical people, psychologists, scientists. It was very unusual for them to get a request from somebody on the outside. They didn't even know how to deal with it; suddenly they had to establish some kind of policy. There was often a problem with sex. Should Cinema 16 be allowed to show a bunch of rhesus monkeys fucking?

I always went by what interested me and what involved me, feeling that there had to be others who'd be interested. I even programmed films that were only interesting for their content—films that weren't well edited, well photographed, but were absolutely marvelous in terms of what they showed. One film—I'll never forget it—was called *Neurosis and Alcohol*. It was about rats that were made drunk, and then presented with extremely frustrating situations. It was hilarious, and extremely revealing and informative about the connection between neurosis and alcohol. On the other hand, we had a film called *Monkey into Man* by Stuart Legg, who came out of the British documentary movement, a scientific (and poetic!) film about evolution, beautifully photographed and edited.

Another good example involved the work of Roman Vishniak, a famous scientist, a famous photographer. The International Center for Photography in New York had an exhibition of his photography, which ranges from definitive books on Polish News to microcinematography—some of the most marvelous I've ever seen. He must be in his eighties now. I began to find out about him, and I went to see him, and spent wonderful afternoons with him, preparing for the screening. All he had was footage; he did not have finished films, and we had to add the sound tracks. He spoke them on tape. I think that presenting his work to the public is one of the best things I've ever done. To me, it was the most natural thing in the world to show scientific films.

The only place I can think of where there

seems to be a consciousness of scientific film as film is among avant-garde film-makers. J. J. Murphy has a film called *Science Fiction* where he took an old science film and reedited sections of it into a comedy; Hollis Frampton's *Mindfall* uses early scientific footage of seizures. Other than that, it's almost as though that whole world of film doesn't exist for film critics or teachers.

One of the quotes that had a tremendous influence on me, maybe the basic one, is, in English (I first heard it in German): "Nothing human is alien to me." Marx used it—it came from a Greek philosopher, I believe. It has allowed me to be tolerant of everything "because it's human." In relation to Cinema 16 it meant there was no such thing as a film that, because of its genre, let's say, would not be of interest to me. I remember Andy Sarris saying that animation is not film, and explaining why (and I've heard others say it, too). I just think that's harebrained. I've seen some very great works of cinema art in the animated film. The same with scientific film. A few months ago I saw a film on TV, one of the *Nova* series I think, about spiders. I've never seen anything more fascinating, or more visual. How can you possibly ignore such work? I'm delighted that it's there, and I want to show it. And it's always worked very well, in terms of audiences.

Those sorts of films are on TV a lot, but it's a shame not to see them on a big screen.

That's right. That spider film would be wonderful in a first-run theater.

Did Cinema 16 do anything with modified forms of film—3D or film installation?

Very little. We showed *The Door in the Garden* based on an H. G. Wells story—a film with variable-size screen images. Had there been a system that would have allowed me to show 3D in 16mm, I would have definitely wanted to do it. I'm extremely interested. I bought a 3D still camera recently and I go to the Museum of Holography regularly—what a great (and mysterious!) place.

Cinema 16 ended before performance art and happenings. They came in during the sixties. I do remember a funny exception. When we premiered Willard Maas's *Narcissus* (we premiered all of his films), he arrived on the evening of the premiere and said, "Where's the projection room?" I said, "Over there, why?" He says, "I gotta do something." He had brought different colored cels with him which he put in front of the lens at certain points so that the film was tinted. Very amateurish, but at the same time very beautifully done. I saw wonderful light shows in the sixties, outside of Cinema 16 I mean, very inventive—superior in some ways to Laurie Anderson's *U.S.A.* She's terribly important, as far



THE LAST
DAY OF
SUMMER:
Polish
avant-garde
film by
Tadeusz
Konwicki

as I can see, but those light shows were remarkable.

At the time when Cinema 16 was developing, were you travelling in Europe a lot?

Not at the beginning. Later on I travelled to film festivals. Or, I would go to Paris and London to meet film-makers, producers, distributors. As time went by, I brought in more and more films from abroad. I remember Agnes Varda asking me if I wanted to distribute *Opera Mouffe*, one of her shorts. In those days she hadn't made features yet. I dealt with Franju in Paris, and got *Blood of the Beasts*. I dealt with Argus Films, which was a fascinating commercial outfit that made hundreds of shorts and also features, many of great interest.

Oh, let me tell you a story. There were supposed to be some fabulous student films being made in Poland, at this famous film school. People told me about them, or maybe I had read something somewhere. I sat down and wrote a letter to the director of the school, with whom I subsequently became good friends, asking if we could get these films here, and sure enough we got them. (I had to

learn about the "diplomatic pouch," and about the censorship involved when you import films.) And what were these films? They were by someone unknown, a student—Roman Polanski! The very first things he did in 35mm: *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, *The Fat and the Thin*, five or six titles. Also, I was in correspondence with Makavejev when he was making little student films in Yugoslavia, but I could never get them out. I had all kinds of contacts with Japan, too—Oshima when he first started. So Cinema 16 was an international enterprise. In retrospect I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had had the editorial and press support Karen Cooper has now at Film Forum. In those days the *New York Times* not only had no policy of reviewing independent films, they had a critic who was an active, hostile opponent of the independent cinema: Bosley Crowther, a very powerful and ignorant man. I'd invite him to every show, but he wouldn't come. Even without that kind of support we had 7,000 members. Imagine what could have happened if we'd had it!

Reviews

NEVER CRY WOLF

Director: Carroll Ballard. Screenplay: Curtis Hanson and Sam Hamm and Richard Kletter, based on the book by Farley Mowat. Producers: Lewis Allen, Jack Couffer, Joseph Strick. Photography: Hiro Narita. Music: Mark Isham. Buena Vista Distributing Co.

Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf* goes his earlier film, *The Black Stallion*, one better. Again Ballard's obsession with pure images of animal energy in wilderness settings produces scenes of unforgettable physical beauty and adventure excitement. But *Never Cry Wolf* plots a tougher, less sentimental encounter than *The Black Stallion*: not boy meets horse, but man meets *canis lupus*. As a result, *Never Cry Wolf* is less charming, but far more powerful.

In part, the new power derives from Ballard's source, the environmental classic of the same title by Farley Mowat, one of the most widely read nature writers in the world today. In *Never Cry Wolf*, first published in

1962, Mowat detailed his assignment as a young biologist sent to the Arctic by the Canadian government to prove that wolves were decimating caribou herds. Instead, Mowat found his "target" wolves immensely likeable, and far from the northern "jaws" of popular caricature. *Never Cry Wolf* was thus the first of many studies rehabilitating the wolf and, at times, stimulating repeal of anti-predator legislation and classification of wolves as endangered species.

Ballard follows Mowat's book quite faithfully, but makes two key changes, one weak, the other magnificent. First, Ballard alters the frame, the episodes before and after the encounter with the wolves, to make an oversensational, misanthropic statement about the world of man. On the other hand, Ballard considerably deepens the story of *one* man, the biologist, here renamed Tyler and superbly played by Charles Martin Smith. Tyler doesn't